



Her startlingly intimate photographs of her own children—direct, untamed, and often nude—made Sally Mann one of the most acclaimed and reviled photographers of the decade. Now, Dodie Kazanjian finds, she's shifting her focus.

# nature of mann

**EN FAMILLE**  
Sally Mann, FAR RIGHT, with her subject matter: FROM LEFT, daughters Virginia and Jessie, son Emmett, and husband Larry.

JEREMY LEADBETTER



#### SOUTHERN SHADOWS

Photographs from Mann's "Deep South" series of 1998. LEFT: The spot where Emmett Till's body was thrown into the Tallahatchie River; BELOW, Windsor Plantation in Mississippi; and, OPPOSITE, a tree in Woodville, Mississippi.



a slow-moving river photographed from a low angle that reveals part of the weedy bank and the ghostly, water-blurred reflection of tall trees: Why does this pastoral image, from Sally Mann's show this month at the Edwynn Houk Gallery in Manhattan, provoke such strange and unsettling reverberations? The photograph might have been taken 100 years ago, but you sense that something happened here more recently, and it did. This is the Tallahatchie River, in Mississippi, and, according to Mann, the spot where the body of the murdered Emmett Till, "naked and necklaced with a cotton-gin fan," went into the water in 1955. Most of the Mississippi and Louisiana landscapes in Mann's "Deep South" exhibition have this quality of unseen human presence. At first glance, they're a long way from the achingly intimate photographs of her three children that made Mann one of the most admired and reviled photographers of the early 1990s, but in reality they are not. Sally Mann's great theme, now as before, is the intersection of memory, place, and human emotion.

"I'd never been to Mississippi until last fall," Mann says as we sit on her porch under the phenomenally prolific white wisteria arbor that surrounds her house in Lexington, Virginia. "It's the heart of the country, but it's such a flawed heart, a damaged heart, and when you've got a damaged heart, you've got a place that will speak. I'm glad you feel there's a human presence in the pictures because I think they're haunted. The souls of millions of dead people are in those pictures—or that's what I want them to have. My lifelong quest is to finish Proust, which I've never done. But there's a wonderful scene where he's sitting on a terrace with another man who says that when your heart is damaged, there are only two things for it—shadow and silence. He goes on to talk about how the shadow has to be this crepuscular shadow and the silence has to be the sound of moonlight through the flute of silence. That's exactly the way I perceive these Mississippi pictures."

Few photographers have ever had the kind of success that Mann had with the highly controversial pictures she took of her children. Nearly 2,000 prints have been sold since her "Immediate Family" exhibition in 1992, and she is still filling orders for more. These photographs showed Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia Mann in such

startlingly intimate moments and situations—often nude or seminude, sometimes dirty, bee-stung, or scratched up, sometimes lost in the sensual reveries of preadolescence—that many people found them shocking, exploitive, or even pornographic. Part of the problem was simply bad timing. The political right wing was in a tizzy over Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic photographs and other transgressive artworks. The FBI had confiscated Jock Sturges's photographs of adolescent girls. The country at large had become acutely sensitized to issues of child abuse and child pornography, and a federal prosecutor had warned Mann that several of the pictures in "Immediate Family" could get her arrested. In spite of vicious attacks and accusations of her being a bad mother, though, nobody has ever brought legal action against Mann, and nobody who has really looked at the work could see anything unwholesome there.

Now 48, she has lived with Larry Mann, her husband of 29 years, in the same slightly funky, more than slightly cluttered, house in Lexington since 1976. The kitchen and living room are full of caged finches. Skeletons of baby birds, a weasel, a rat, and other fauna proliferate on bookshelves and windowsills. (They will soon be joined by the skeleton of Eva, Sally's beloved greyhound, "the most beautiful, elegant dog you ever saw," who died last winter and whose skinned carcass is being picked clean by insects in a grave hidden in the woods.) Her two current dogs, a border collie and a boxer, run wild in the backyard, where there is a serious vegetable garden and a pond, along with swings and other evidence of the three children, now grown and away at school.

It's a comfortable, ramshackle sort of place, but it's recently been bought by Washington and Lee University, next door, which plans to tear it down to erect an art center there. The Manns would feel worse about that if their thoughts and energies weren't taken up primarily by the house they're building a few miles outside

of town, on a 450-acre farm that Sally's father bought, sight unseen, in the 1960s. The new house, a one-story square, was designed (by Sally) to make things easier for Larry, who is in the early stages of muscular dystrophy.

During lunch on the porch, I note the contrast between the white linen napkins and sterling silver and a glass tabletop, where siftings of wisteria blossoms and dirt are casually brushed away by hand. There is homemade rosemary bread and watercress soup from the garden and Waldorf salad, "my absolute favorite thing in the world," which Sally made this morning, after her daily three-mile run. For dessert, she serves Nabisco Old-Fashioned Ginger Snaps, right from the box. Larry Mann, who often walks home for lunch from his law office around the corner, has the easygoing charm of a handsome man without vanity or artifice. He's as natural as she is. They both dress casually, he in khakis, she in black jeans and a white shirt with rolled-up sleeves. They married when she was nineteen, and she claims she had to propose to him. "There's a difference of opinion there," he says, laughing. "Well," says Sally, "he took a little nudging."

Although Mann is a dead ringer for her mother—slim, fetching, with a retroussé nose and an impish expression—everybody says that she is just like her father, a small-town doctor who zipped around Lexington in an Aston Martin, turned 30 wild acres into

an astonishingly eccentric garden that is now open to the public, and startled the natives with his jokey, priapic sculptures and iconoclastic wit. Mann's parents were an odd match. "Daddy was a

The South is deeply ingrained in Mann, and she has never taken a photograph in which it is not present

character, from a Dallas family with some oil and real estate money. At the age of 26, he went around the world on his motorcycle, taking along a tuxedo. Mom was from Boston, a very poor New England girl with gallons of blue blood running through her. All the different values that those two areas embody were strong in each of them."

The South, where her parents had decided to live, is deeply ingrained in Sally's character. She was born in Stonewall Jackson's house in Lexington. As she describes herself in the catalog that accompanied "Immediate Family," she was "a feral child running naked with a pack of boxers . . . an Indian, a cliff dweller, a green spirit; I rode my horse with only a string through his mouth, imagining flight." She went away to school (the Putney School in Vermont, then Bennington, then Hollins College), but there was never much doubt that she would come home, to Lexington, and she has never taken a photograph in which the South is not present. When she and Larry had Emmett, in 1979; then Jessie, two years later; then Virginia, in 1985, it was understood that they would grow up as free and unfettered as their mother had.



“As subjects, grown-ups aren’t as good as kids,” says Mann. “They’re too self-conscious. There’s no playfulness”

**DIRECT VISION**

*Crabbing at Pawley's*, a 1989 photograph from the controversial “Immediate Family” series, features Mann’s daughter Jessie and her focused gaze.

The outraged moralists who condemned Sally's photographs for their frank nudity and languorous sensuality, and charged her with being an irresponsible mother, were missing the point. At the isolated cabin Sally's father had built on the Maury River, Sally and her two brothers swam naked when they were young, so it was utterly natural for her children to do the same. They became their mother's main photographic subjects for ten years, from 1985 to 1995, and the pictures she took of them, mostly in that idyllic setting, offer as deep an insight into the mysteries and pains of growing up as any we are likely to come across.

Looking at them again recently, I was struck by how few laughing or smiling faces there are. The children are disturbingly beautiful, and often, in spite of their bloody noses or dripping Popsicles, they seem to regard us with an uncanny awareness of the adults that they will become. Each picture is a true collaboration between photographer and subject; Sally invited their imaginative participation and often let them suggest the scenario. There is a sadness at the core of "Immediate Family," a sadness that touches on the fleeting and fragile nature of childhood, and also, perhaps, on the deeper romanticism of growing up in the South. "With her summer photographs of Emmett, Jessie, and Virginia," Janet Malcolm wrote in the *New York Review of Books*, "Mann has given us a meditation on infant sorrow and parental rue that is as powerful and delicate as it is undeserving of the facile abuse that has been heaped on it."

Mann jokes about her controversial work, "At least Pat Robertson won't go after me—I think my father delivered him"

as good as kids. They're too self-conscious. A lot of those 'Immediate Family' pictures happened because I'd say, 'All right, we're in a great setting, think of something interesting,' and Jessie would pluck a bouquet of flowers and bedeck herself. Or something would happen. You say the same thing to a grown-up and they just have no idea what to do. There's no playfulness."

The playful imp in Sally is still very much alive and well. She showed me a print of *The Three Graces*, which she had planned to exhibit in 1995 but decided not to at the last minute. It shows Sally, Jessie, and Virginia on a roof, nude, arms linked, legs spread, copiously peeing. Larry warned her that a law expressly forbids showing a minor urinating. "Isn't that something?" Sally says. "What about all those statues of putti peeing in gardens? At least Pat Robertson won't go after me—I think my father delivered him."

The picture-taking sessions with her children just petered out, according to Sally. "As they got older, they were out of the house more and more, and I found I was less and less interested in doing portraits. I even began to wonder if it wasn't always an exploitive act on some level. I had enormous power over the children, although at the time it didn't seem that way, because they were such participants. With most children and most parents, the concept would be disturbing. I almost expect people to feel that way. But it worked because of this unique situation, of me with my particular kids. When you explain that those pictures were mostly taken out at the cabin, in an isolated spot miles from other people, it's easier to understand them. In a way, they're all about place."

Sally's focus has now shifted from the human face and figure to landscape, the landscape of the South. "I guess if you look, they're not that different from the family pictures," she says. "They're the backgrounds, sort of, for those pictures." Her 1997 show at Edwynn Houk, "Mother Land," nevertheless seemed like a dramatic break from her earlier work. The large-format, black-and-white landscapes of Virginia and Georgia, taken with her signature eight-by-ten view camera, had an antique, time-saturated patina that made them as evocative as old-master paintings. *Artforum* found the show "stunningly beautiful." Other reviewers marveled at her technical innovations. Using old lenses and slow film, doing all her own darkroom work (while listening to books on tape—*Anna Karenina*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Diary of a Napoleonic Foot Soldier*), she used light leaks, dirt specks, hairs, and other built-in flaws to make prints that recalled Civil War landscapes in their poignancy and sense of loss. "They sold really well," Sally says. "I was so touched that a lot of the same collectors of the family pictures were willing to make the jump with me."

After lunch, we drive to the farm. One of her friends, the artist Cy Twombly, who also grew up in Lexington and has a house there today, says it's not a farm but a "domain," hundreds of acres of rolling hillsides, grazing horses, and fields of timothy hay and orchard grass and alfalfa. Sally proudly introduces her two new Arabian mares—"so bijoux and so refined in the way they move." We inspect the concrete foundation of her new house. Sally recently bought out her two brothers' shares in the property, with some unexpected help from the film director James Cameron; when friends pointed out to her that one of Leonardo DiCaprio's

notebook sketches in *Titanic* was lifted directly from a Sally Mann photograph, she received an out-of-court settlement.

We drive downhill across an open field and pick up a narrow dirt track heading into the woods. After about half a mile, this brings us to the Maury River, a fairly wide, fast-moving stream, bordered on the far side by a sheer, 320-foot-high rock wall. The cabin that her father built is perfect—a simple, no-nonsense rectangle with a tree growing through the front porch and the roof. The feeling of privacy and isolation is complete. It's where anyone with a grain of sense would want to have spent their summers.

Last fall, I talked with Sally right after she got back from her trip to Mississippi. She had traveled alone, which was something new for her. "I was ecstatic," she said, "so content and contained. I'm really hot on the trail of something."

Two days later, a letter arrived, along with a rough print of one of the new Mississippi photographs. (She wrote part of the letter on the back.) "My pale exclamations of amazement to you over the phone don't begin to embrace that awestruck, life-affirming, heartbreaking ten days," she wrote. "Oncoming drivers never failed to raise a languidly welcoming hand at this stranger, not just the impenetrably black faces behind the wheels of the low-slung, battered old Grand Prixes and Catalinas, but also the Bull Connor types in new white pickups bristling with antennas, an NRA sticker in the back window. . . . I traveled within a nimbus of goodwill, like some Nabokovian state of grace." A couple she met at a lecture gave her their empty, antebellum house to stay in for a week. "Shamelessly, I took them up on it."

Several letters later, describing the accidental flaws and de-

liberate scratches and other defacements she was inflicting on her negatives, she added: "It hasn't escaped me that this is somehow metaphorical for the South itself—the poor, dear, desolate South." In the Virginia and Georgia landscapes, she wrote, "much of what I was trying to say was about this perception of defeat and loss and memory. But from the very first trip into Mississippi, this new work has been about something altogether different and yet, to me, raised in the South of massive resistance, even more germane, elusive, and fundamental. These pictures are about the rivers of blood, of tears, of sweat that Africans poured into the dark soil of their thankless new home."

Her Deep South landscapes all have stories to tell. Even at their most abstract, these pictures exert as strong a narrative pull as her family images. The underlying emotion—for me, at any rate—is a sense of ancient sorrow and compromised beauty. I've never seen any like them, and I can't get them out of my head. You can get lost in these landscapes.

"The murder of Emmett Till has haunted me . . ." Sally wrote, "since I first became aware of it, early in my life. (I was born in '51; he was murdered in '55.) I enclose an image taken on one serenely mote-floating, balmy, yellowish October afternoon at the very boat lock from which Emmett . . . was heaved into the Tallahatchie. . . . [I] stared in amazement at the humdrum, backwashy feeling of the place, made complete by a piece of lined paper with schoolgirlish handwriting nailed on a tree, advising us of the End of the World." □

#### MISSISSIPPI EXPLORER

An untitled image from the "Deep South" series that Mann took last fall, on her first visit to the state.